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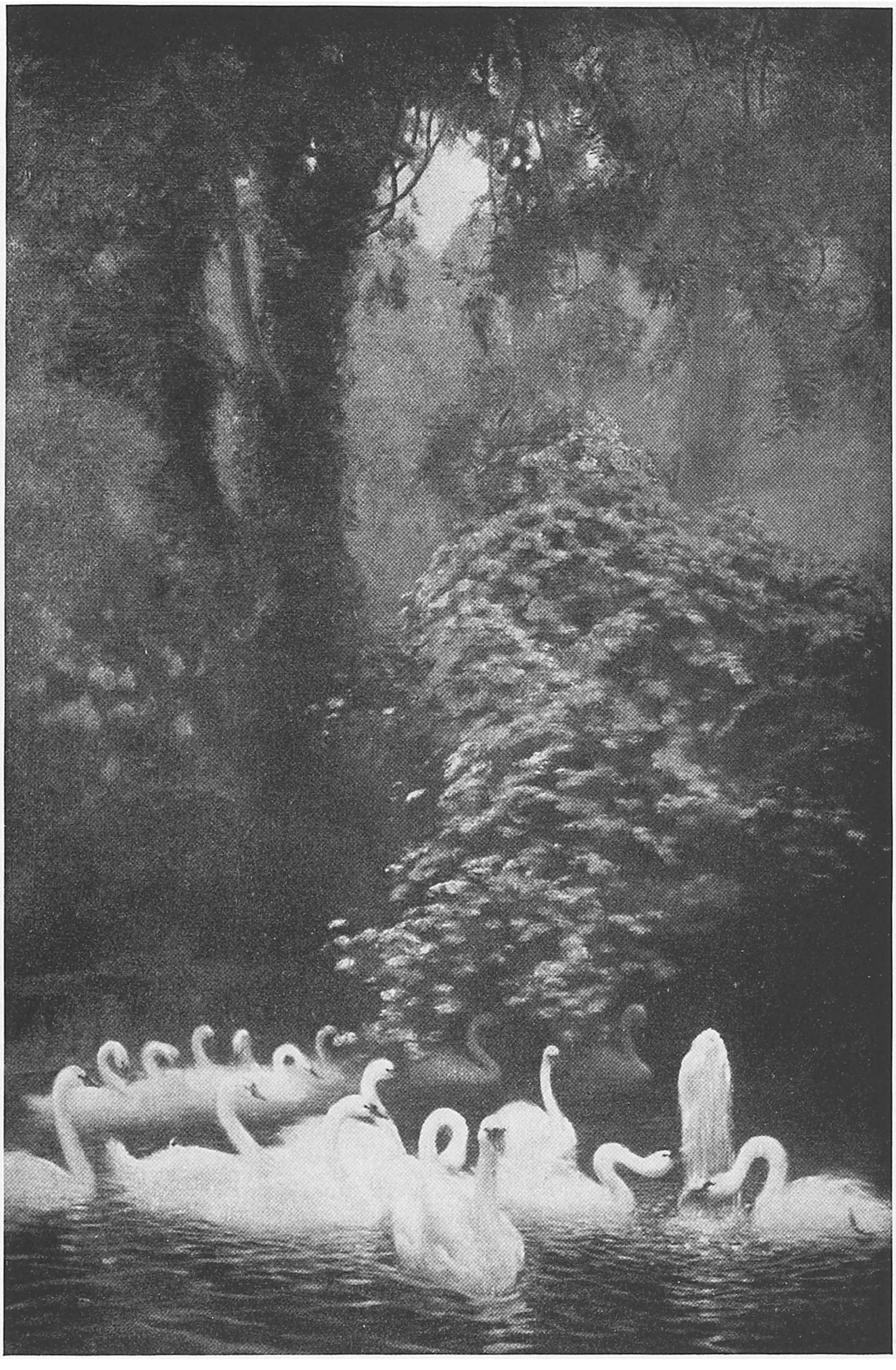

The Swans
By La Touche

MODERN FRENCH ART

PICTURES by modern French artists have been on view in the galleries of Messrs. M. Knoedler & Co. The exhibition has been a great success. One of the pictures, "The Swans," by La Touche, is reproduced from it. Besides La Touche, the artists represented were Besnard, Carrière, Cottet, Dagnan-Bouveret, Degas, Dupuy, Gauguin, Manet, Martel, Ménard, Monet, Pissaro, Renoir, Signac, Sisley, Simon, Vuillard.

Not all these artists are Impressionists, yet Impressionism is the keynote of the exhibition; so that from the show it was possible to present the meaning of Impressionism to those who follow it.

Briefly stated it is that in nature no colour exists by itself. The colouring of objects is pure illusion. The only creative source of colour is sunlight which envelops all things, and reveals them, according to the hours, with infinite modifications. The mystery of matter escapes us. We do not know the exact moment when reality separates itself from unreality.

All colour is composed of the same elements as sunlight, namely, the seven tones of the spectrum. It is known that these seven tones appear different, owing to the unequal speed of the waves of light. The tones of nature appear to us, therefore, different, like those of the spectrum, and for the same reason. The colours vary with the intensity of light. There is no colour peculiar to any object, but only more or less rapid vibration of light upon its surface.

The colours of the spectrum are thus recomposed in every thing we see. It is their relative proportion which makes new tones out of the seven spectral tones. This leads immediately to some practical conclusions. A leaf is not green, a tree-trunk is not brown, and, according to the time of day, i. e., according to the greater or smaller inclination of the rays (scientifically called the angle of incidence), the green of the leaf and the brown of the tree are modified. What has to be studied, therefore, in these objects, if one wishes to recall their colour to the beholder of a picture, is the composition of the atmosphere which separates them from the eye.

Shadow is not absence of light, but light of a different quality and of different value. Shadow is not a part of the landscape where light ceases, but where it is subordinated to a light which appears to us more intense. In the shadow the rays of the spectrum vibrate with different speed. Painting should, therefore, try to discover here, as in the light parts, the play of the atoms of solar light, instead of representing shadows with ready-made tones composed of bitumen and black.

Moreover the colours in the shadow itself are modified by refraction. In a picture representing an interior, the source of light may not be indicated. The light circling round the picture will then be composed of the reflections of rays whose source is invisible, and all the objects, acting as mirrors for these reflections, will consequently influence each other. Their colours will affect each other, even if the surfaces be dull. A red vase placed upon a blue carpet will lead to a very subtle, but mathematically exact, interchange between this blue and this red, and this exchange of luminous waves will create between the two colours a tone of reflections composed of both. The science of optics can work out these complementary colours with mathematical exactness. If a head receives the orange rays of daylight from one side and the bluish light of an interior from the other, green reflections will necessarily appear on the nose and in the middle region of the face. The painter Besnard, who has specially devoted himself to this minute study of complementary colours, has given some famous examples of this.

All colour is composed of the same elements as sunlight, the seven tones of the spectrum. These colours are recomposed in everything we see. It is their relative proportion which makes new tones out of the seven spectral tones. It is artificial that paints have been invented which represent some of the combinations of the spectrum, just to save the artist the trouble of constantly mixing the seven solar tones. Such mixtures are false, and they have the disadvantage of creating heavy tonalities, since the coarse mixture of powders and oils cannot accomplish the action of light which reunites the luminous waves into an intense white of unimpaired transparency. The colours mixed on the palette compose a dirty grey. What, then, is the painter to do, who is anxious to approach, as near as our poor human means will allow, that divine fairyland of nature? Here we touch upon the very foundations of Impressionism. The painter will have to paint with only the seven colours of the spectrum, and discard all the others. That is what Claude Monet has done boldly, adding to them only white and black. He will, furthermore, instead of composing mixtures on his palette, place upon his canvas touches of none but the seven colours juxtaposed, and leave the individual rays of each of these colours to blend at a certain distance, so as to act like sunlight itself upon the eye of the beholder.

Such, then, is the theory of the dissociation of tones, which is the main point of Impressionist technique. It has the immense advantage of suppressing all mixtures, of leaving to each colour its proper strength, and, consequently, its freshness and brilliancy. At the same time the difficulties are extreme. The painter's eye must be admirably subtle. Light becomes the sole subject of the picture; the interest of the object upon which it plays is secondary.

Through the application of these principles Claude Monet arrived at painting by means of the infinitely varied juxtaposition of a quantity of colour spots which dissociate the tones of the spectrum and draw the forms of objects through the arabesque of their vibrations. He is a "pointellist." Not all Impressionists adopt his technique. But every one of them—and one might say almost every artist represented in the Knoedler exhibition—strives to render the subject he paints in the light of the atmosphere that surrounds it.